The Complete Mark Twain

A Review by ARCHIBALD HENDERSON.

THE WRITINGS OF MARK TWAIN. Definitive Edition. Thirty-five volumes. New York: Gabriel Wells.

IF there is any American author who deserves the final honor of the "definitive edition," it is Mark Twain. In the case of a great writer, who is widely popular as well, the tendency of the immediately succeeding generation is to demand everything the writer has put forth. They want all the cards laid on the table—for inspection, rating and final analysis. A volume might be written on this fascinating topic: "To what extent is it justifiable to spread before the eyes of the public all that a writer has left behind—much of which is known to be, both by critical standards and in the light of the writer's own action, ephemeral and unworthy of preservation?" We shall not stop to daily with this perennially fascinating question. In general, I would lay down the general principle that anything which the author has printed and has not suppressed as forbidden republication is fair game for the editor of a "definitive edition." The truth cannot hurt an author, if he is a genius; it can only demonstrate the familiar statement: "Homer nods." Not Goethe, Shakespeare, Ibsen was always on the heights—their work is as irregular in its quality and rhythm as is nature, life itself. So we welcome the appearance of this "definitive edition" of Mark Twain—which we owe to the fine spirit and undimmed enthusiasm of Mr. Gabriel Wells, who has already laid us all under obligations by his magnificent editions of Joseph Conrad and O. Henry.

We welcome this edition because of its beauty and elegance. We welcome it because it contains two volumes of absolutely unpublished materials. We need not expect that the contents of these two volumes will measure up in quality to the best of Mark Twain—to "Tom Sawyer," "Huckleberry Finn," "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court," or that masterpiece in little, "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg." The corroding touch of time, the lapse of interest in the ephemeral part of his writings, will naturally operate to diminish the great bulk of his writings. But we are glad to have two new volumes—full of characteristic essays and speeches—which shall kindle anew the uproarious spirit of hilarity aroused by "The Innocents Abroad," "Roughing it," "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," and those inimitable "Sketches," so characteristically Western America, so essentially "Mark Twain." We welcome this edition because Mr. Wells has shown the good judgment to include among the thirty-five volumes—ten more than are found in the original Harper's complete edition—Bigelow Paine's biography, a historical work of great reverence, extended over four volumes, and Mark Twain's letters, arranged by Paine, in two volumes.

Most of all, we welcome this edition because it embodies the fulfillment of a fervent wish of the lamented Samuel M. Clemens. In an announcement of the edition, we read: "It was Mark Twain's most cherished desire that a definitive and complete edition of his entire literary output be published. With this end in view, shortly before his death, he autographed with his signature 1,024 sheets which should be inserted in the first volume of such an edition of his works, when it might appear. These autographed sheets were so carefully and hermetically preserved that their very existence was lost sight of until quite recently, when an inventory disclosed them. This fortuitous discovery made possible the fulfillment of Mark Twain's ambition, a project which ever since he passed away has been increasingly demanded by the public—an absolutely complete comprehensive and definitive edition of his writings, with full biographical data, ably edited, finely printed and illustrated, and autographed by Mark Twain's own hand." Consequently this "definitive edition" of Mark Twain's writings is limited to 1,024 copies—no more can ever again be issued.

These thirty-five volumes will be issued in groups of several volumes at comparatively brief intervals. The series is under the general editorship of Bigelow Paine, and each volume contains a special introductory essay. Among those who will write these introductions are: E. V. Lucas, Booth Tarkington, Meredith Nicholson, Arnold Bennett, Stephen Leacock, William Allen White, Gilbert K. Chesterton, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Kate Douglas Wiggin.

In his introduction to volume one, fittingly "The Innocents Abroad," Paine thus describes that sidesplitting and forthrightly frank book: "'The Innocents Abroad' carried Mark Twain's fame literally to the ends of the earth. In an incredibly short time it was being read in nearly all lands, and its author had a fame that seemed to have sprung up by magic. Thirty-one thousand copies were sold in a year, and by the end of the third year more than one hundred thousand copies had been sold. It was a book of travel; its lowest price was $3.50. No such record had been made by a book of that description; none has equaled it since." A daring book, surely—yet there is "an atmosphere about it all, a dreamlike quality, which lies somewhere in the telling, it may be, or in the tale." Of course, Mark is "having his little joke"—playing hob with the sanctities and shrines of holy Europe, the revered and worshiped. But, as Stuart Sherman says, Mark "does not undertake to tell them (more like himself) how they ought to look at objects of interest, but quite resolutely how these objects of interest strike a thoroughly honest, Western, American eye."

Mr. Lucas, who writes an "Appreciation" of this most famous of travel books, points out the significant fact that "The Innocents Abroad" revolutionized the travel book. Ever thereafter they were written with more alertness, with less atmosphere of hush and treading on tip toe—with a more wide eyed, disillusionized inspection of the world. But more than all, as Mr. Lucas pertinently observes, "was the influence which the book exerted on Mark Twain. . . . It projected him into older civilizations, it brought him into contact with new people; in short, it refired his ambition. We can tell, beneath his veneer of languor and whimsical cynicism and doubt, how seriously he took his task by the care with which it is done, the sheer hard work of it, the pursuit of the most telling word."

How it carries one back—in my case fifteen years—to those halcyon days when I sat on the upper deck of the Minneapolis and heard Mark Twain tell stories galore—to dip into the "Sketches New and Old." Here, of course, is "The Jumping Frog," which James Russell Lowell pronounced "the finest piece of humorous writing yet produced in America"—but which Mark thought little of at first, writing indignantly to his mother: "To think that, after writing many an article a man might be excused for thinking tolerably good, these New York people should single out a villainous backwoods sketch to compliment me on!" And here too is the "True Story" which is historically important in Mark Twain's career. "Its original narrator, Aunt Rachel," says Paine, "was in reality the cook at Quarry Farm, where Mark Twain spent his summers, and her name was Auntie Cord. Her mistress, Mrs. Clemens's sister, had often urged her to tell her story to Mark Twain, but she had been reluctant. One moonlight evening, however, when the family was seated on the veranda, she came around to say good night, and Clemens engaged her in conversation; then, almost before she knew it, she was seated at his feet telling the strange tale, very much as he set it down next morning. It gave Mark Twain his first entry into the *Atlantic Monthly*, where he had long wished to be represented. William Dean Howells, who was then editor, wrote hastily to express his joy in it. Its realist kind of black talk won him, he said, and a few days later he wrote again: 'This little story delights me more and more. I wish you had about forty of them.'"

See the old feeling for Mark Twain—that picturesque and leonine figure whom I saw the center of wholehearted admiration of the English people at Oxford in 1907—comes back as I read the opening sentence of the "Preface" to "The Gilded Age": "This book was not written for private circulation among friends; it was not written to cheer and instruct a diseased relation of the author's; it was not thrown off during intervals of wearing labor to amuse an idle hour. It was not written for any of these reasons, and therefore it is submitted without the usual apologies." Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, who writes the "Appreciation" which heads this volume, speaks in general terms exceedingly laudatory of Mark Twain—in striking contrast to the attitude of certain New Englanders of long vanished days.

There is a singular appropriateness in the selection of the author of "Clarence," "Gentle Julia" and the "Penrod" stories to write the "Appreciation" which accompanies volume eight, "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer." Tarkington, with an acumen quite characteristic, points out that not only Tom Sawyer, but his creator (at the time he produced the classic), was a romanticist. "Mark Twain permitted him [Tom Sawyer] to have, not just the adventures a boy does have, but the adventures a boy would *like* to have."

The District Attorney and the Accused

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phancy. He eagerly searches the columns of the papers for his name, and feeds out "stories" to the boys in the press room. He really believes that because he is a more or less important figure in the tiny world of turnkeys, cops and cheap politicians he counts for something in the world outside.

But some day his little strutting universe receives a jar. He discovers that his supposed reputation is no reputation at all—other than that he is, or has been, "in the District Attorney's office" like so many other young men; that nobody save the people actually interested in them paid any attention to or even ever heard of his "star cases" and that among his social equals he is regarded as a cross between a truant officer and a headquarters detective. He perceives that the praise heaped so unstintedly upon him is but the lip service of time servers who have seen in him, or his influence, a chance to secure "a raise" or a better job. When that day comes and he realizes that he has been living in a queer tucked off corner, devoting himself to much that really has little connection with the practice of his profession, and really offers more of advantage to the novelist than to the lawyer, in a circle whose standard of refinement is that of a Harlem River park, and whose ideal of social life is a Coney Island picnic given by an East Side benevolent association—when, in a word, he sees his job as really it is, and his burst bubble of pride turns in his hands to dead sea fruit—then, if he has not the satisfaction of knowing that he has lived up to his own standard of what a gentleman should be, his time has been worse than lost.

Outside the Glamour.

The District Attorney has a variety of duties connected with the administration of justice of most of which the public is unaware, or at any rate unmindful. Besides being the Grand Jury's adviser he is obliged to report in writing to the Governor on all cases in which applications for pardon have been made, looks after extradition matters, is charged with passing on the financial responsibility of bondsmen and has to take part in the inquiries conducted into the sanity of defendants before and after conviction. Most of these things are done for him by trained and qualified assistants.

His chief task, however, is to hear and determine the merits of the complaints made to him by aggrieved citizens.

If these are of the routine variety the complainants are relegated to the magistrates' courts and are looked after by the deputies. If they are unusual, either in the importance of the offence to the community, the standing or influence of the accused, or in the fact that the offense is one outside the scope of the criminal law as commonly construed or applied, the District Attorney goes over the matter himself in the first instance, then refers it to an assistant for further examination, and finally decides what is to be done in conference with the latter.

But he cannot simply sit in his office and wait for complaints to be brought to him there; he must act, no matter in what way the knowledge of crime be brought to his attention. If a Baddenseik building falls or a subway caves in or a gas tank blows up he must take steps to locate the responsibility for criminal negligence, if any there has been. There are over two hundred felonies and over four hundred misdemeanors on the New York statute books, offenses against which he is charged with prosecuting. There are an unlimited number of possible conspiracies to commit acts "injurious to the public health, to public morals, or to trade or commerce, or for the perversion or obstruction of justice, or of the due administration of the laws." There are, in fact, so many statutes and ordinances that there is hardly anybody who does not violate some one of them every day of his life.

There are laws governing the conduct of places of public amusement, factory labor, Sunday observance, fancy dress balls, ice cutting, funerals, every conceivable trade and occupation, every aspect of human activity, from pulling teeth to planting oysters, for whose enforcement he may be held responsible.

Law making has become a national indoor sport, and it is one of the worst things we do. Our legislative harvest is upward of 15,000 statutes per annum. During a recent period of only five years there were passed over 62,000 laws, State and Federal, which required for their interpretation 65,000 decisions of courts of last resort, filling 630 volumes. Each State contributed its share.

We seem to have a curious idea that we can make ourselves good by making it a crime to be bad. But we do not really intend that the laws shall be enforced. They are only in the nature of moral window dressing. We hire a man to enforce them, but we expect him to use a wide discretion about how he does it, and if we do not like what he does we are annoyed and feel that he is taking advantage of us.

Added to the multiplicity of criminal statutes is the fact that human nature is not only fallible but that a large percentage of political office holders and their hired subordinates are morons. No one can administer an office with a hundred employees without all sorts of mistakes being made without his knowledge, for which he technically is responsible and for which the District Attorney might with some color of propriety initiate a prosecution.

There is no public office so well run that some basis of fact could not be found apparently to justify an official investigation, even including that of the District Attorney himself, who usually does the investigating. There are abuses in high office and low; bribery and corruption in officialdom and in business; and sharp practice everywhere. Probably there will be for a long time to come. Besides there are thousands of acts which in their nature are morally just as reprehensible as those which the law stigmatizes as crimes, but which are outside the statutes.

Crimes are those acts only which have been regarded by our lawmakers as sufficiently dangerous or harmful to society to be forbidden under penalty. An act may be highly immoral or wrong, may, in fact, be a grievous sin, and yet not a crime. A misdemeanor may be much more heinous than a felony. Crimes are not crimes merely because they are wrong, but because the State has enjoined them. You can allow a baby to be run over by a motor when you could have saved it by stretching out your hand, and be guilty of no crime whatever; or you can let your neighbor die in agony without telephoning for a doctor or going to his assistance. You can be the meanest sort of a mean swindler, and yet to be beyond the reach of the law, which is highly inadequate to punish commercial or financial fraud. And the poor are forever with us, always being taken advantage of by reason of their inability to protect themselves.

"So I returned and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun—and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter."